DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 990 EA 018 724

AUTHOR Bucko, Richard
TITLE Elementary Grade Retention: Making the Decision.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (Las Vegas, NV, April 14-18, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Achievement Rating; Administrator Role; Decision Making; Elementary Education; *Evaluation Criteria; *Grade Repetition; Guidelines; *Policy Formation; Principals; Student Development; Student Evaluation; *Student Promotion

ABSTRACT

Today's administrators must exercise caution in using student retention as a means of responding to changing social values and to the current media attention on declining standardized test scores. Recent reviews of hundreds of studies of student retention have concluded that some low achieving students do benefit from retention, but the majority of retained students show no consistent benefits from retention and score lower than promoted students in areas of academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, attitude toward school, and attendance. Although research is still inconclusive, and alternatives to retention often exist, the works of L. Wayne Light and Laurence Lieberman identify factors principals can use to judge an individual retention candidate as well as to develop a model for a decision-making process for retention. The essentials of a model for retention must include: (1) a clearly written policy adopted by the local school board, (2) a decision-making procedure with stated time lines and position responsibilities, and (3) effective communication with parents and the school community on the policy and procedure. Appendix A provides a sample policy statement. Appendix B provides a sample retention worksheet for use by the principal. Fourteen references are appended. (IW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272990

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Richard J. Bucko

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

RICHARD BUCKO Ed. D.*
NAESP CONVENTION
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA
April / 1986
* Medford Lakes, NJ

ELEMENTARY GRADE RETENTION: MAKING THE DECISION

There is probably no single decision a school administrator makes that is more significant in the life of an individual student than that of retention. The repeating of a grade and the resulting addition of a year to the school experience will have an impact for the remainder of that life. The impact will not only be educational but psychological, social, and occupational. The important point is that the impact be positive and productive, not negative and demoralizing.

Today, there are two extreme positions concerning retention that are easily distinguishable. One is the merit promotion position typified by the use of a specific test or tests that are used as the sole criteria for retention. The other is the social promotion position which provides for the advancement of all students to the age-appropriate grade level.

Retention can be a complex topic for teachers and administrators when they try to develop a rationale and procedure for retention in their district. This may be particularly true if they try to depend on the research background, as we shall see in following paragraphs. Retention is also a highly emotional issue for those directly involved, including teachers, parents and, of course, the student. This article directs its focus on retention for the non-special education elementary school student. While issues presented here have implications for special education and high school retention policy, they are beyond the scope of this analysis.

EA 018 724

HISTORY

Grade schools were introduced in this country in Massachusetts during the 1840's. Grade levels allowed a school to determine the number of years that a child had attended and to assign work accordingly. "Failure" of a grade level was implemented when a student had not completed the assigned work to the satisfaction of the school authorities. In some ways this system reflected the uniformity of work patterns developed during the industrial revolution.

It appears, that in some areas of the country, as many as half of all students were retained at least once by the end of eighth grade during this period (Larson, 1955). As recently as the 1950's it was not uncommon to find a student of fourteen in the fourth or fifth grade, depending on the number of times he was retained. Today, retention of a student in more than one grade level is rare.

During this century figures on the percent of students retained are subject to some doubt since most states, even today, do not require local districts to compile and submit this information. A study completed in 1963 found that almost 20 percent of students during the prior 30 years had been retained at least once (Ypsilantis and Bernart). During the 1950's retention rates sharply declined, followed by a moderate decline in the 1960's. This was a period when social promotion was popular. Starting in the late 1970's retention rates began to significantly increase. In 1978 more than 600,000 eight-year-olds were enrolled one or more years below the typical grade for their age. This represented a very sharp increase over 1976. Figures for the model age of students and their corresponding grade are now being maintained by Federal Census Bureau. It was during the late 1970's that minimum

competancy testing became more common. Today, the average retention rate in elementary schools across the country appears to range from 12 or 15 percent (Medway, 1984).

The public schools in the United States reflect the social and cultural values of our nation. These changing values influence the causes and rates of student retention. The recent attention of the media on declining standardized test scores and the ensuing national reports have placed greater demand of accountability on state and local education agencies. As a quick way to get, what they hope will be, results, many states and districts have encouraged or used retention as a means of addressing the problem. In these cases the desire to raise test scores through retention may be to the detriment of many students.

THE RESEARCH

Hundreds of studies have been conducted over the past seventy years on the effects of retention. In a well known 1975 study, G.B. Jackson analyzed 44 studies on grade retention, but found research too poor to draw any definite conclusions. Jackson wrote, "Thus those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade." (p. 627).

Recently, more sophisticated research techniques have permitted more conclusive information. Holmes and Matthews (1984), of the University of Georgia, reviewed 650 studies from which 44 were selected. The selected group represented 4208 non-promoted students and 6924 regularly promoted students. Five major areas of dependent variables

were addressed: academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, attitude toward school and attendance. In every area the promoted group scored better than the retained group. Holmes and Matthews concluded:

> Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of nonpromotion, the burden of prooof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many other plans have failed.

Frederic Medway, an associate professor of psychology at the University of South Carolina, reviewed many research studies on retention. He states that, "there are no consistent benefits of grade retention for the majority of students with serious academic or adjustment problems." "Why then," Medway asks, "are so many children retained?" His response is interesting and can be placed in four categories: (1) accountability to the public; (2) nearly all retained children make some progress in the repeated year, (but would they make more progress if promoted?); (3) parents often ask for retention, particularly if they feel it helped another of their children; (4) three out of ten children do benefit from retention, according to the research.

If retention is one alternative for some low achieving students, who are the ones who will most likely benefit? From a principal's perspective, the research is not as conclusive as one might like, but some indicators exist. According to Medway's analysis, the best

candidates are primary students, chronologically young, not opposed to being retained and whose parents accepted the decision and worked with the child at home.

A study by Sandoval and Hughes (1981) analyzed specific variables that they used to predict successful retention in the first grade. 146 students were identified as retention candidates in the spring by their teachers. They were all given a broad range of tests with teachers and parents completing interviews and questionaires. Of this group 78 were actually retained, 61 were promoted and 7 dropped from the study. In the spring of the following year most of the same tests and measures were administered to students, teachers, and parents. The primary findings of the study were that "successful retainees" have the following characteristics:

a. and I.Q. of 84 and above
b. some academic achievement during the first year
c. sound emotional judgment with age appropriate social skills
d. parents who accept retention and work with the school
e. the teacher has confidence in the retention decision

Note: Children with very low intelligence and achievement or poor emotional development may best be served through special education.

On the other hand, Sandoval and Hughes also cited characteristics that were not related to gains during the retained year. These characteristics included physical and emotional maturity, visual-motor development, the child's early development and family background, and the child's acceptance of retention.

The research methods have improved through the years and the focus of who will be a "successful retainee" has become clearer. But today's

research provides us only with a guide that must be combined with judgment and a clear thought process in order to achieve successful decisions. The next section of this paper addresses this process.

MAKING THE DECISION

The work of two men stand out as valuable references for the administrator who wants to develop a model for a decision making process for retention. One is H. Wayne Light, a California psychologist who, in 1977 (revised 1981), developed 19 factors to measure an individual candidate for retention. Each candidate is evaluated in each of these categories with a resulting numerical score and a corresponding recommendation concerning retention. Light is quick to point out that his scale is a guide that must be interpreted in the decision process.

The second man is Laurence Lieberman, a consultant in special education who developed a similar set of factors with which to judge an individual retention candidate. Lieberman rejects the use of a numerical scale. An important similarity in using each of these decisions making designs is that no factor can be used in isolation, nor can retention be based on any one factor. Factors shared by Light and Lieberman include the following:

Student's chronological age
Knowledge of English
Present grade (lower the grade, more likely the success)
Previous retentions
Siblings retention experience
Estimate of intelligence
School attendance
History of learning disabilities
Student's attitude toward retention

It should be noted that researchers have questioned some of the

factors identified by Light and Lieberman (Sandoval and Hughes), although those presented above are rather well accepted. The models of Light and Lieberman can be used, modified and updated by the decision maker (generally the principal) who must develop and justify his decisions. A model must be based on reason, research and common sense. It must address the total child and take into consideration community standards and school district expectations for each grade level.

The essentials of a rational primary grade retention makel are: (1) a clearly written policy adopted by the local school board, (2) a decision making procedure with stated time lines and position responsibilities and (3) effective communication with parents and the school community on the policy and procedure. Appendix A provides a sample policy statement. Appendix B provides a sample retention worksheet to be used by the building principal.

Retention is often the correct course of action, but alternatives to retention are often the best way to meet individual needs and get academic results. These alternatives include beginning school when the child is developmentally ready, transitional classes and smaller classes with higher levels of individualization. Equally important is a positive attitude by every teacher concerning the ability of every student to learn.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that a pure merit system based on the results of one or more tests is excessively narrow, with little regard for what has been discovered in the last ten years about retention and how children learn. On the other hand, damage is done to the individual

and the public's confidence in the schools if a pure social promotion system is followed. Administrators in the field of education are professionals with access to a broad range of information about any child that can be drawn from teachers, parents and professional support staff, including psychologists and learning disability specialists. Grade placement decisions must be made on an individual basis by educators who are familiar with current research and theory as it relates to retention.

Appendix A

SAMPLE

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROMOTION POLICY

A student's promotion from one grade level to the next must depend on the student's academic progress and his or her social, emotional and behavioral readiness to profit from instruction at the next grade level. Academic and personal progress shall be measured in terms of achievement of district goals and objectives.

The decision to promote or retain a student will be made in the best interest of the student. Parents/guardians will be requested to meet with the teacher (s) and building principal if their child is being considered for retention. The principal, if necessary, will request the additional staff to evaluate and review the student's progress. The decision to promote or retain a student is the responsibility of the building principal.

The principal will notify the parents/guardians by mail before May 15 of the decision to retain a student. More than one retention during the elementary school years will receive extreem attention and requires the approval of the superintendent.

SAMPLE

RETENTION REFERAL FORM

Student's Name _____ DOB_____ Male__ __ Female_____

School _____ Grade level_____ Teacher_____

Factors Considered:	Concern	No Concern or Not Applicable	Comments
Academic potential			
Academic achievement			
Emotional maturity			
Social maturity			
Physical size			
Child's attitude			
Previous retention			
Absenteeism			
Knowledge of English			
Siblings in school			

Standardized Test results:

	Name of Test	Date	Reading Percentile National	Reading Percentile Local	Math Percentile National	Math Percentile Local
Grade	_____	_____				
Grade	_____					
Grade	_____					

Intelligence Quotient: _____ Test Used_____ Date _____

Support Personnel Evaluations(psychologist, learning disability specialist,etc.)

Teacher Comments:

Parent/Guardian Statement:(Please Attach) Date of Conference_____

Building Principal's Determination and Comments:

_____ _____

Date Principal's signature

REFERENCES

Ames, L. B., "Retention: A Step Forward", Early Years Parent Magazine, 1980

Hess, F., "Issues in Education, A Documented Look at Seven Current Topics", East Syracuse - Minoa Schools, 1978, ERIC Document Reproduction Ser ice No. ED 158 391.

Holmes, C. T and Mathews, K. M., "The Effects of Nonpromotion on Elementary and Junior High School Pupils: A Meta-Analysis", Review of Educational Research, Summer, 1984 Vol. 54, No. 2.

Jackson, G. B., "The Research Evidence on the Effects of Grade Retention", Review of Educational Research, Vol. 45:613-635, 1975.

Labaree, D. F., Setting the Standard: The Characteristics and Consequences of Alternate Student Promotion Policies, Prepared for the Promotion Standards Committee of Citizens Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia, 1983.

Larson, R. E., AGE - Grade Status of Iowa Elementary Pupils, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1955. Cited by Rose Et al, 1983

Lieberman, L. M., "A Decision-Making Model for In-Grade Retention (Nonpromotion)" Journal of Learning Disabilities, Vol. 13 Number 5, May, 1980.

Light, W. H., Light's Retention Scale (Manual), Academic Therapy Publications, Novato, California, Revised Edition, 1981.

Lindelow, J., "Syntheses of Research on Grade Retention and Social Promotions", ERIC Clearing House on Educational Management, March, 1982.

Loeb, V., "Philadelphia Moving to Promote Students on Basis of Performance". Education Week, April 11, 1984.

Medway, Frederic J., "Grade Retention", A yet unpublished paper prepared for T. R. Kratochwill (Ed.), Advances in School Psychology: Vol. V. Hillsdale, N. J., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Janet S. Rose, et al., "A Fresh Look at the Retention-Promotion Controversy", Journal of School Psychology, 1983, Vol. 21

Sandoval, J., and Hughes, P. G., Success in Nonpromoted First Grade Children Final Report, Davis, California: University of California, 1980, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 212 371.

Ypsilantis, J. N. and Bernart, E. H. "Variation in Age-Grade School Performance", Teachers College Record, Vol. 58:268-77, 1957.